

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
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**MOGAN CULTURAL CENTER
LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

LAOTIAN SECRET WAR EXHIBIT

**INFORMANT: KAI PHONTHARAKSA
INTERVIEWER: MEHMED ALI
TRANSLATER: PINKHAM BOUASRI
DATE: FEBRUARY 17, 2008**

**A = ALI
K = KAI
T = TRANSLATOR**

Tape 08.03

Note: “T” will be used to denote Translator’s voice, translating the questions asked of and the responses from the informant.

A: So this is interview with Kai Phontharaksa on February 17, 2008. So thank you for coming today. First a little bit of background information. Where and when were you born?

K: I born from Thailand. (A: Okay) June 10, 1941.

A: Okay. And where in Thailand? What village?

K: [Non Kai.] No, [Punnichai, Non Kai]. [Unclear Non Kai].

A: So the name of the village is?

K: Ban Mai.

A: Ban Mai. (K: Yes) In the Province?

K: And then Ban Mai, [Dunboun Kuppoun].

T: That's the city, [Dunboun].

K: And [Umper and Punnichai, Junwat, Non Kai].

A: And so you were born in Thailand, but you, your family is Laos?

K: No. I go there. I marry with an American Laos. Oh, I'm an army Laos.

A: Okay.

T: A soldier, a Laos soldier. (K: Yes)

A: Okay. So you're Thai actually? (K: Yes) Oh, okay. Okay. Okay. So what were your parents' occupations?

K: My mom and dad worked the farm.

A: And did you go to school when you were younger?

K: Yes. I go to school in [unclear].

T: Fourth grade. [K: Fourth grade] Grade four.

K: Grade four. And [unclear] Thai.

A: And so you, how did you meet your husband?

K: I meet my husband from, I go to sell then in [Pak Khai], Laos, and [unclear].

L: She's like a business lady who went to sell stuff in Laos.

A: What were you selling over there?

K: [Unclear]. Just, I brought food.

L: Food, [unclear] food.

K: And just Saturday, Sunday.

L: So like a small vendor thing you know, at the market area.

A: Umhm. Umhm. So what did you think about this Laos guy when you first saw him?

K: I like that army.

A: You like the army?

K: Yah.

A: Why?

K: Because I love the army. I don't like the police. [All laugh] Police guy, I don't like it. But I don't like that, and Thai boys, I like the Laos army.

A: And where were you in Laos exactly where you met your husband?

K: I meet him, I am sixteen years old. And one year, and then he come to meet me, I come to meet him. Then I am seventeen then I marry. I marry then I move to Laos.

A: You moved to Laos?

K: Yes.

A: And where did you move to?

K: Um, I don't remember.

A: Okay. Now your husband was in the military, and did you travel with him as he was a soldier?

T: Translates question in English.

K: Yes.

A: And where did you go?

K: [Luang Prabang], Savannakhet, Pakse, then Vientiane.

A: Okay. And he, during this time he was going around the country because he was fighting the Communist?

K: Yah.

A: So tell us some stories, if you remember, about his service and what he did.

K: He never did fight with the Communist. (A: Okay) Then somebody, till 1978 the people and him cousin to tell him to go look something. Then tell him go and you know, [unclear].

T: Go to jungle?

K: Yes. And they kill him, [unclear]. [Speaks in Laos]

T: So he wasn't a soldier in 1970. Then he became a civilian.

A: Okay, before the war ended then?

T: Yah. (A: Okay) And then he was like the village leader at his village; after, when he retired from the army.

A: And when you say he didn't do fighting, what did he do exactly for the army?

K: He never go and fight. He drive the car for [Speaks in Laos].

T: Yah, he, he was the driver for the soldiers, I mean for somebody, a big leader, high rank. I don't know what they call it.

A: Like that guy over there, or somebody like that?

T: Colonel or something I would say.

A: And so where was he the village leader? Where did you guys move to where he was the village leader?

T: Ban Sakai (A: Okay) Oh, they live in Vieng [Savan]. That's the name of the village, but Sakai is another village next to that.

A: Okay. And during that time was there any war near you?

T: Only the people that are against the Communist that came trying to fight with the Communist people.

A: Okay. Now how, did that impact you in particular, that fighting?

T: No, no impact.

A: And then she was starting to say something about her husband's cousins asked him to go to the jungle. What was that about?

T: That was just the, at the time he's already the village leader. And then his cousin tell him that people in the jungle, like the people that are against the Communist, and he was telling him that, not to do, you know, not to fight with the Communist. Stuff like that.

A: This is after the Communist took control?

T: Yes.

A: Okay. All right. So he went out to encourage the people to stop fighting?

T: Right. Okay, after he retired from the, to be the driver of the soldiers, and then he became another driver for the doctor. And then he was trying to help people, teach people in the village. (A: Umhm) Okay. So his cousins, or somebody related to him, they were asking him to go to hunt in the jungle. And then, but his cousin then brings them food, and you know, guns and bullets with them to the jungle and give it to the people that are against the Communist.

A: Okay. And your husband told them not to fight. What did they say?

K: He doesn't say nothing. Then he tell, they tell and my husband, "Okay, you go this way. Then I go this way." Then my uncle, they have friends over there to wait for him over there. Then they go. Then I think five something, five people or something to do like that. Then take the knife and they (--) Then [finishes in Laos]

T: They kill him.

A: They killed who?

T: Her husband.

A: Oh her husband. (K: My husband)

T: Yah, after that, after he saw them you know, and then he didn't want to participate with them. And then they told him to go that way, but instead they you know.

A: They followed him?

T: Followed him and killed him.

A: Oh. What year was that?

K: 1978.

A: 1970?

T: 8.

K: 1978.

A: 1978. Okay. And this was where?

K: From [Ili, Ban Ili].

T: [Ban Ili?] (K: Yah)

A: Okay.

K: Outside Vientiane.

A: Okay. And those people, you never heard from those people again?

K: No.

A: But how did you know that that happened?

K: After he killed my husband, then I went and then my uncle, they say your husband they bring a long way, they'll be there tomorrow, and then he come back home. But I wait all day. I didn't see my husband come home. Then I go ask my uncle. My uncle, he go to Thailand. Then I wait, and the next day my husband friend, the wife that tell, that come to see me. They say your husband die in [Ili,] you go pick it up. They say the people kill him. But my uncle and my husband's friend out from camp, Non Khai Camp.

A: So did they betray your husband, your uncle?

K: Yah.

A: Huh?

T: Yes, betray him. Yah, those people they're afraid that he's going to come back and tell the Communist soldier, and then they're going to go fight. So that's why they killed her husband.

A: But then they themselves went to Thailand?

K: Yah.

A: And this was your husband's uncle, right?

K: Yah.

A: On your mother (--) On his mother's side, or his father's side?

T: Oh, brother-in-law.

K: Yah.

A: Okay. So it was your husband's brother?

K: Yah. No, brother-in-law.

A: Okay. And is that guy still around?

T: Yah, he's still alive.

A: Where is he?

K: I can't tell.

A: So you were there by yourself with your children?

T: After the funeral.

K: Funeral finished then I go to Thailand, my country, Thai.

A: And you take the kids with you?

K: Yah, my kids too.

A: And you didn't have to go to the refugee camp because you were Thai, right?

K: Yah, yah, I go. Because I don't have (--) Because I go Laos then for a long time, [finishes comment in Laos).

T: She went to the camp when she moved to Thai.

A: She could (--) You couldn't go back to your family?

T: Couldn't go back to the family because she doesn't have any documents to prove that she's Thai. (A: Oh) Yah, because she moved to Laos for a long time.

A: How many years between the time you moved and came back?

T: She was married at seventeen, and she moved back thirty-seven. That's twenty years.

A: Twenty years, okay. And what year did you go back to Thailand?

K: 1978

A: '78.

K: Yah.

A: Okay. Wow. So how many children did you have at that time?

K: I have one. (A: Just one) Yah, I have one of my step-daughter. I have stepson, but my stepdaughter from [unclear]. Then my stepson from California.

A: Now when you married a Laos guy, did you parents approve of that?

K: Yah.

A: They didn't have any problem?

K: No. (A: Okay) No problem.

A: How long did you (--) Which camp did you go to?

K: Non Khai

A: Non Khai. And how long were you there for?

K: Year and a half.

A: Wow. And what did you do during the time you were there?

K: I didn't do nothing. (A: No) Just walk around, drive a motorcycle around the camp. [Chuckles] Then I go back my house, then I come back to the camp.

A: And you went to your house? You mean in the camp you went to your house?

K: No. Yah.

A: Or you went to your village?

K: I live in the camp, right, (A: Yah) then sometimes I hate the camp. And I [ask and I prove it], and then I go back to my house.

A: Back to your original house in the village?

K: Yah, Ban Mai.

T: Ban Mai, yah, that's the village in Thailand.

A: How far away was the camp?

K: About three hours.

A: Oh wow. So when you went back to your family's house, how come you just didn't stay there?

K: Stay in camp?

A: At the house? Why did you go back to the camp?

K: Just to visit my sister, my brother. Then I go, sometimes I don't have rice. I want to get the food. Then I go back to the camp.

A: Okay, okay. So there was food at the camp.

K: The food at the camp [chuckles], some one day, and then eat [unclear] and fish, and beef, pork, that's it.

A: So more food at the camp than at your village?

K: Yah. No, at my house they have a lot of food. They have fish, they have chicken.

A: So ask her the question again. Why was she going back to the camp then if she had better stuff at her own village?

K: Because I don't have nothing.

T: She does not have Thai, you know, citizenship.

A: So even you went back to your family they wouldn't let you stay there?

K: I can't. They can't stay, but, and I pay money for [baht] and they make a green card something.

A: To make a green card? Okay.

K: But I don't want to pay, you know, that's expensive. I need thirty thousand, and my son, and thirty thousand my younger son, and my stepson, thirty thousand. I don't have it.

A: So you were in the camp for a year and a half.

K: Half, and one year and a half.

A: And then somebody sponsored you?

K: Yah, before I work in, from American Embassy, English Embassy, Soviet Embassy. I worked, housekeeping, cooking.

A: When? When your husband was, when you were married in Laos? (K: Yah) You worked for those Embassies? (K: Yah) Okay. So then they helped you get the paperwork quick, (K: Yah) because you worked at the American Embassy?

K: Yah. I have an ID, American Embassy. I have ID from English Embassy. Then I live in the camp. Then my boss, he work in English Embassy. Then he come. He go

home, he go back home, then he trained me to work with a friend. Then he come back and you know, the people go and the Thai, then he want to take me and my son, and my, then daughter, my granddaughter go. Then I don't like it. I don't like to go with them in English.

T: Oh, England. Her old boss want to sponsor her to England, but she doesn't want to go to England, because he only wanted three people, but she has four in her family.

A: And this was somebody that you worked for at the British Embassy?

K: Yah.

T: He gave her some money to buy food.

A: So what happened next?

T: She went for an interview to come to America after that. She told them that she used to work for the Embassy, the American Embassy, and then her husband was a soldier. So that's why they processed it faster for her.

A: Hm. And you had a card from your Embassy time?

K: I don't know where I live. I have the card, American Embassy, and then English Embassy. Then I have paperwork, then give me the good job, good cook.

A: Oh, they gave you a reference?

K: Yes.

A: Reference letter?

K: Yah.

A: Okay. Now how did you get that job at the American Embassy?

K: I have friend, Thai people work and live with me in my house. Then asked me, "Do you want to work in housekeeping." I say, "Yes."

A: Good. So you got sponsored. And who was your sponsor?

K: [Unclear]. Italy, Italy people.

A: Italian people?

K: Yah, Italian people.

A: From where?

[Cell phone rings]

K: Louie. She doesn't remember his last name?

A: Were they from Lowell?

K: No, Boston.

A: In Boston? (K: Yah) Okay.

K: But he die, and his wife die too. And then husband die first. And then [unclear].
And she die three years ago.

A: They have children?

K: Yah, they have children, two. One the girl and [finishes in Laos]

[Ali leaves the room to answer phone]

T: Oh, the sponsor has two children. One's a doctor, and one will be computer?

A: And so when, when you first came did you go to Boston?

K: Yah.

A: And how did you think about the United States?

[Cell phone rings again, and Ali leaves room to answer call]

T: She finds it lonely and don't know what to do. They want her to go to school, but she wants to work. But her children are already in school.

A: Okay. So did you go to work then?

K: Yah.

A: Where did you work at your first job?

K: First job a nursing home.

A: Nursing home? Okay. Where?

K: Brookline.

A: Brookline. And what did you do there, housekeeping?

K: The housekeeping, and change the clothes, and give the food for the old lady. Take her go in the shower, change the clothes. Then make-up, and clean everything. They like me. They like me. They say Chinese. And [unclear]. And "Oh good." [Unclear].

A: So where did you live, in Brookline?

K: No, Dorchester.

A: Dorchester, okay. And how many years did you live there?

K: Six years.

A: Okay, you came to the U.S. in what year? 1980?

K: Yah, 1980.

A: And so in 1986 you left Dorchester.

K: No. I don't left. Sometimes then I come to Lowell. Sometime I go to, just to visit, but I stay in Dorchester about ten year.

A: Okay, and then you moved where?

K: Moved from Lowell.

A: Moved to Lowell?

T: To Lowell from Dorchester.

K: Yes.

A: And why did you move to Lowell?

K: My son, he marry, then he go and then live for himself. And I like to live for myself and then my friend.

A: So you had some friends here in Lowell?

K: Yah, Bonnie.

A: Bonnie? (K: Yah) Bonnie [Last name unclear]. So what have you been doing for work since the nursing home?

K: I do, give the food for old lady. Change the clothes, take her go in the shower.

A: Umhm. So you still do that work?

K: Yah.

T: No, she doesn't work anymore.

K: No work anymore.

A: Did you only work in Brookline?

K: I work in nursing home, Brookline, three years. Then I work in nursing home from Dorchester, (A: Okay) Hancock Street, two years. I don't like the supervisor, ah, manager. She say, "How come you [unclear], do nails, you go make up your hair, everything, you clean." I say, "You tell me to buy some [nice clothes] five day. Don't change, don't, and wear their own clothes." But I speak English a little bit.

A: So that manager criticized how you looked nice?

K: Yah. My sponsor, and he take me go to work from a nursing home. Manager say, can you buy white shoes, white shirt for five days. They're clean, everything clean, face and hair.

A: Your face and your hair all clean.

K: Yah, all clean. She told my sponsor. But I understand she tell my sponsor. Then I [wear them] and then I change every day. But my finger, I clean. Then before that I have the ring from my husband, the diamond. She jealous of me.

A: She's jealous of you?

K: Yah. She say, "Why you live with [unclear]? You have a diamond ring?" I said, "My husband, he army, he go to school in the United States. He buy it for me." He say, "No, I don't believe you." I say, "If you not believe me I don't care." Then I go, I don't like him. I take the punch card to go home. Then she called my sponsor, then I tell him. He say, "Okay, don't go back." Then Western Hotel open and I go apply there.

A: Where, the Western?

K: Yah, Western Hotel.

A: Where?

K: Arlington. Huntington.

A: Huntington Ave?

K: Yah.

A: In Boston, yup. So you worked over there? (K: Yes) How long did you work there for?

K: I worked there nine years.

A: Oh wow. So when you moved to Lowell you worked down in the hotel?

K: No. No. (A: No) I stayed in Dorchester. I go, sometime I go by bus, sometime I go by train.

A: Yah, yah. And where did you work after that? Did you retire from there?

K: I, after that I worked in Marshal. (A: Yah) Then I worked in, I quit in Western Hotel, then I worked ... I don't remember. Electronics.

A: Electronics?

K: Yah, one year and a half.

A: Okay. Where was that? What town?

K: Watertown.

T: Watertown.

A: Oh Watertown. Okay.

K: Electronics.

T: She doesn't like the chemicals to load the board. She quit the job and then she got another job in Woburn. At that time, because you can just quit and then get a job right away.

A: Yah, that's the old days.

T: A lot of jobs before.

A: And then what year did you move to Lowell?

K: I don't remember. [I ask] Bonnie. Before she was just moved back and forth. She moved to Lowell for awhile, and then she'd go back and live with her son for awhile, and then move back to Lowell, back and forth. And then now she's staying here.

A: So any final stories that you want to share?

K: No.

A: Okay, well thank you very much for your time today.

K: Okay.

Interview ends.